

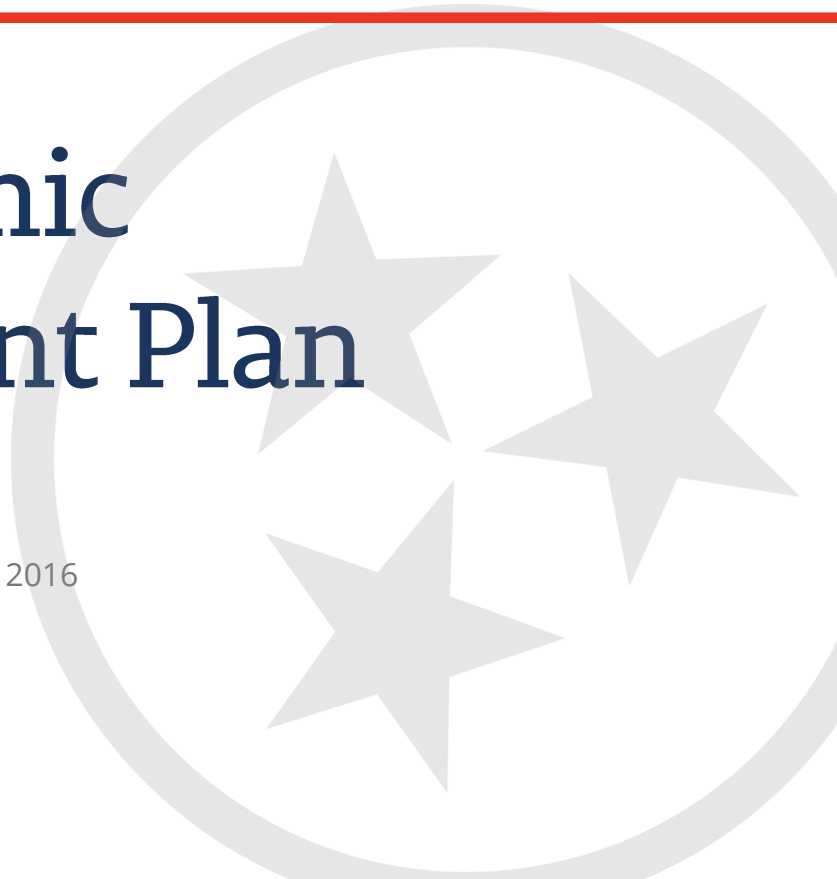


TENESSEE
DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION

State Systemic Improvement Plan

Phase II

Tennessee Department of Education | April 2016



Executive Summary

In Phase I of the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP), the Tennessee Department of Education completed comprehensive data analyses, assessed internal infrastructure, and sought broad stakeholder feedback to determine a State-identified Measurable Result (SiMR). Based on this work, the following SiMR was identified: increase by three percent annually the percent of students with a specific learning disability (SLD) in grades 3-8 scoring at or above basic on the English language Arts (ELA) statewide assessment.

In Phase II, the department has identified a detailed implementation plan to exact the desired change specified in the SiMR. Three primary components have been addressed to ensure the success of the SSIP:

- Infrastructure development
 - Identify the improvements to state infrastructure that will support districts in implementation of coherent improvement strategies and their evidence-based practices (EBPs)
 - Identify how the state will leverage current initiatives that impact students with disabilities (SWDs)
 - Identify the parties responsible for changing infrastructure, the resources needed to implement the plan, and the timelines for completing improvement efforts
 - Identify how the state will involve other departmental divisions and stakeholders
- Support for district implementation of EBPs
 - Identify how the state will support districts in implementation of EBPs to achieve the SiMR
 - Identify the steps needed to implement the EBPs
 - Identify how the state will support districts in scaling-up and sustaining implementation of the EBPs
- Evaluation
 - Identify how the evaluation is aligned to the theory of action and SSIP components
 - Identify how the evaluation includes stakeholders and will be shared with stakeholders
 - Identify the methods the department will use to evaluate the SSIP
 - Identify how the department will measure the effectiveness of implementation
- Technical assistance and support
 - Identify how the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and federal technical assistance centers can help with the implementation of the SSIP

*Tennessee's SiMR:
Increase by three percent
annually the percent of
students with an SLD in
grades 3-8 scoring at or
above basic on the ELA
statewide assessment*



Recap: Phase I

Phase I of the State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) was invaluable for the Tennessee Department of Education to truly begin unpacking the data available on students with disabilities (SWDs) and evaluate how the department could leverage its infrastructure to better support districts as they engage in activities that will lead to the measurable improvement outlined in the State-identified Measureable Result (SiMR) for SWDs. Careful analysis of data relative to SWDs, including the percent of the school day during which SWDs have access to core instruction, graduation rates, and post-school outcomes for SWDs, was conducted by staff within the division of special populations.¹ In addition, the division of special populations examined the department infrastructure currently in place to support the SSIP initiatives. During this infrastructure analysis, interviews were held with state staff from a wide gamut of offices within the department, including: finance, operations, consolidated planning and monitoring, special populations, data and research, and curriculum and instruction.² These interviews yielded information about bright spots in the department's infrastructure and areas upon which to improve. Being cognizant of these strengths and challenges in the department's structure was crucial when moving forward to solidify a concrete SiMR.

For the SiMR, the department decided to focus on assessment data aligned with Indicator 3 of the Annual Performance Report (APR). Rather than addressing all assessment results for SWDs as a whole, the focus was placed on English language arts (ELA) assessment data and students with a specific learning disability (SLD). The department and its stakeholders determined the SiMR would be to increase by three percent annually the percentage of students with an SLD scoring at or above basic on the ELA statewide achievement test for grades 3-8. To achieve this SiMR, three coherent improvement strategies were identified. These strategies were purposefully aligned with current initiatives underway in multiple divisions across the department, particularly within the divisions of special populations and curriculum and instruction. The coherent improvement strategies identified were:

1. Increasing access for SWDs to high-quality core instruction
2. Addressing special education as the most intensive intervention in a continuum of service model
3. Addressing students' skill deficits as they relate to academic content standards so they can succeed in the general education setting.

¹ Former title of the division in place when Phase I was written. This division has now been restructured and titled the division of special populations and student support

² Former title of the division in place when Phase I was written. This division has now been restructured into two separate divisions, titled the division of academic strategy and operations and the division of content and assessment design.

All three of these strategies are focused on providing SWDs access to core instruction from content experts while providing differentiated instruction and intensive interventions to meet their area(s) of need. The department remains confident that effective implementation of these three initiatives can help all SWDs succeed and improve on assessments, including those students with an SLD.

The more detailed theory of action below delineates the steps by which the SiMR will be achieved. This theory of action has been slightly modified from the original version included in Phase I. After internal conversations about the coherent improvement strategies and how to effectively provide supports to districts relative to associated evidence-based practices (EBPs), some adjustments were made. Figure 1.1 below disaggregates the inputs, strategies, activities, and short- and long-term outputs for the three coherent improvement strategies, and specifies how they will work in concert to achieve the SiMR.

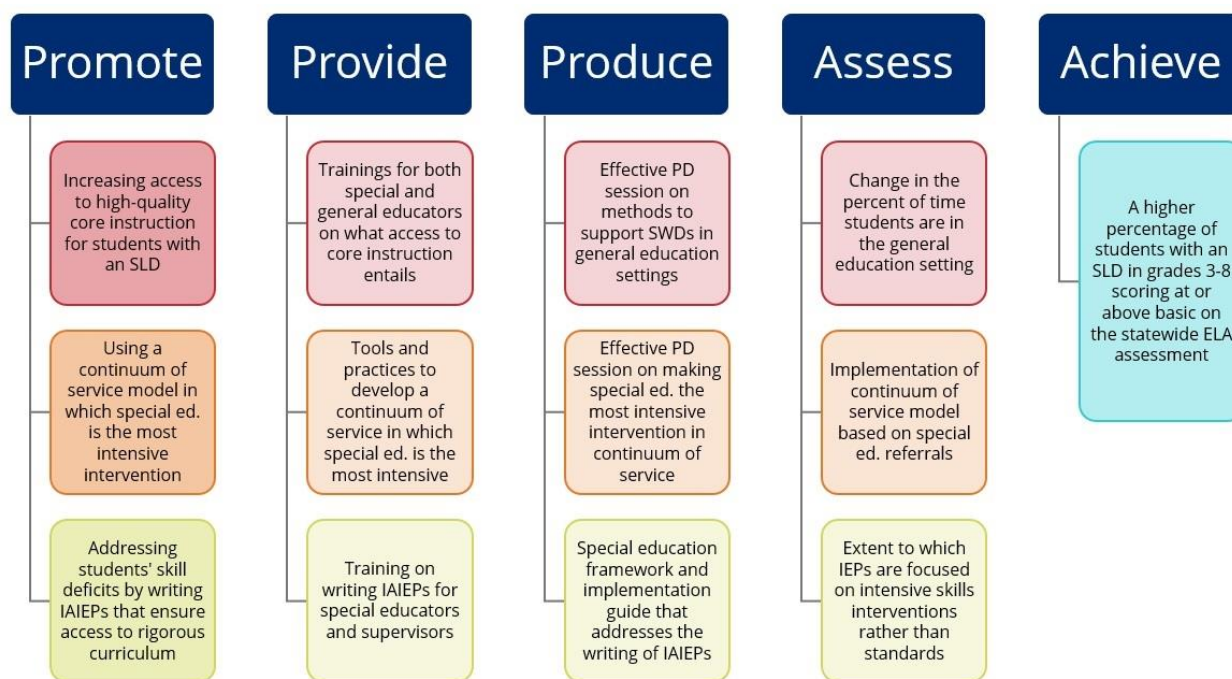


Figure 1.1. The detailed theory of action from Phase I.

While data and infrastructure analysis were the bedrock upon which Phase I of the SSIP was built, stakeholder input was equally integral to each step in the process and was solicited whenever possible. Information relative to data investigations and infrastructure assessments was reviewed by special education supervisors, educators, parent advocacy groups, and the Governor's Advisory Council for the Education of Students with Disabilities. The latter organization represents parents of SWDs, individuals with disabilities, educators, and student and parent advocates. Stakeholders provided feedback and guidance to the division to help identify the SiMR and develop a theory of action. This authentic

stakeholder engagement has carried over into Phase II and continued to provide unique perspectives that have helped the department further refine and shape the SSIP and the work to be done in Phase II.



Moving Forward: Phase II *Infrastructure Development*

As Phase I of the SSIP wrapped up and work for Phase II got underway, major shifts took place within the department. In January 2015, Kevin Huffman, who served as the Commissioner of Education for approximately four years, resigned, and Candice McQueen was appointed in his place. Under her leadership, the department was restructured over the spring and summer of 2015. This restructure³ is particularly noteworthy in discussions of infrastructure development in Phase II as the new organizational structure better supports LEAs with implementing and scaling-up EBPs to achieve the SiMR.



Improvements to State Infrastructure

Under the restructure, the division previously known as special populations became the division of special populations and student support. This restructured division now houses the office of special populations (including students with disabilities), all early childhood programs (including the early intervention systems, Part C and 619), the state special schools, and the office of safe and supportive schools. The wide range of programs within the division and their proximity to and alignment with each another have made for a very collaborative environment. The continuum of services from birth through 21 for all students, particularly SWDs, is crucial to the division and department's new strategic plan. As well, the wrap-around services addressed by the office of safe and supportive schools help the division remain mindful of the supports available to districts and students that go beyond just the classroom to the school and community.

One of the most critical shifts in the restructure was the placement of the division of special populations and student support under the chief academic officer. This aligned the division of special populations and student support with offices previously isolated, including the divisions of: teachers and leaders; content and assessment design (formerly under the now defunct division of curriculum and instruction); academic strategy and operations (formerly under the now defunct division of curriculum and instruction); college, career, and technical education; and the Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE) district support offices.

³ A copy of the new department organizational chart, titled "Attachment 1 – Org Chart," has been attached under the "Phase 2 SSIP" tab in GRADS 360. For more information on the structure of the Tennessee Department of Education, please see the department directory at: <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/directory>.

Such realignment has ensured that the division of special populations and student support has an active voice and role within the academic functions of the department and streamlined the communications with other offices relative to the goals and strategies of the division, including the SSIP. In light of this, delivery of information and support to districts has become more efficient and intentional, with a clear message coming from one large cohesive team rather than smaller, disparate teams. Divisions under the chief academic officer now work in concert with one another to provide support to districts relative to the department's new strategic plan. Thus, the division of special populations and student support can ensure that the SiMR is a focal point of the department as a whole rather than a subsection.

Implementation Team

The core leadership, namely the Commissioner of Education and her office, led the charge in restructuring the department to address many of the concerns that were noted in Phase I relative to department infrastructure. This leadership team was made aware of the SSIP and SiMR and the consternation around department structure potentially impeding the work to be done. Some additional positions were developed to address staffing shortages and teams were reorganized to better support department staff and the work being done. As aforementioned, this restructuring to better support internal staff and districts took place in early 2015 and the strategic plan (see more below) was released in the fall of 2015.

The anticipated outcome of this department reconfiguration is increased collaboration across divisions in the department with unified, clear communication consistent across the entire department. To assure this consistency, the department released a strategic plan to all districts and stakeholders across the state that affirms the priorities of the department and how they will be attained.

New Strategic Plan

When discussing improvements to the department's infrastructure, it is important to note that the strategic plan largely shaped the restructuring of the department to ensure alignment between the goals of the plan and the divisions across the department. In late September 2015, the department released this new strategic plan for Tennessee.⁴ The strategic plan has three main goals:

- Tennessee will continue rapid improvement and rank in the top half of states on the Nation's Report Card. *Measurement: Tennessee will rank in top half of states on 4th and 8th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments in 2019.*

⁴ A copy of the strategic plan, titled "Attachment 2 – Strategic Plan," has been attached under the "Phase 2 SSIP" tab in GRADS 360.

- The average ACT score in Tennessee will be a 21, allowing more students to earn HOPE scholarships. *Measurement: Tennessee will have an average public ACT composite score of 21 by 2020.*
- The majority of Tennessee high school graduates will earn a certificate, diploma, or degree. *Measurement: The class of 2020 will be on track to achieve 55% postsecondary completion in six years.*

To achieve these goals, the department identified five priorities:

- *Early Foundations and Literacy:* Building skills in early grades to contribute to future success.
- *High School and Bridge to Postsecondary:* Preparing significantly more students for postsecondary completion.
- *All Means All:* Providing individualized support and opportunities for all students with a focus on those who are furthest behind.
- *Educator Support:* Supporting the preparation and development of an exceptional educator workforce.
- *District Empowerment:* Providing districts with the tools and autonomy they need to make the best decisions for students.

The priority most salient to Tennessee's SSIP is the *All Means All* priority. The work done to support this priority will include:

- Enhanced support with sharing best practices for RTI² in specific grade levels
- Pilot programs for personalized learning opportunities that support both students who are behind needing remediation and students who are advanced needing acceleration
- Addressing systemic gaps in different student groups' access to highly-effective teachers

The work for the All Means All priority is very closely aligned to initiatives launched over the last two years within the division of special populations and student support, including the three coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs delineated in the SSIP. Having the All Means All priority within the strategic plan for the department as a whole underscores the state's commitment to special populations, highlights the value of the work currently being implemented by the division of special populations and student support, and connects the work to other divisions.

State Personnel Development Grant

The State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) was awarded to Tennessee in 2015. This grant offers the opportunity to increase state capacity to better support districts in implementation of the coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs. The SPDG is completely aligned to the SSIP, with both working in tandem to achieve the SiMR. Allocation of resources to a common goal will prove extremely beneficial throughout the coming phases of the SSIP. As well, the SPDG will be a crucial resource to improve and augment human capital within the department. The infrastructure of the division of special populations and student support will be strengthened with the addition of three new full-time

staff members to serve as interventionists in the three grand divisions of Tennessee (east, middle, and west). While the interventionists have not yet been hired, an explicit set of criteria provided in the “Support for District Implementation of EBPs” component will be used to identify quality candidates. The addition of these three staff members will greatly strengthen the work being led by division staff and, in part, address the lingering capacity issues cited in Phase I.

The interventionists will be responsible for providing the training support to district-identified academic coaches in conjunction with other necessary trainings for district administrators and teachers. In addition to providing these supplementary training opportunities, the interventionists will provide continuing support through regional monthly communities of practice. These communities of practice will provide opportunities for professionals to meet regularly to review the strategies learned through trainings, report on successes, and work through problems of practice. Such a forum was found successful in the state’s prior SPDG. Communities of practice will focus on improving participants’ abilities to implement the interventions taught during trainings through the use of aggregated implementation fidelity data and discussions of successes and challenges.

Coherent Improvement Strategies and District Support

The coherent improvement strategies outlined in Phase I overlap with the work undertaken by many divisions across the department. However, during Phase I, the onus of the coherent improvement strategies and their support fell primarily on the division of special populations and student support. Under the restructure, the division of special populations and student support has forged connections between other divisions to mitigate redundancy of work, foster clearer communication, and develop sustainable supports for districts.

That being said, the division of special populations and student support staff will still be the primary leads on the state implementation team (more information detailed in the “Support for District Implementation of EBPs” component) to provide training on the coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs and support the goals of the SSIP. The division’s instructional programming team, data services team, director of special education eligibility, and assistant commissioner will serve the most pivotal roles in the SSIP implementation process. However, by fostering strong relationships with divisions across the department, staff within the division of special populations and student support can better communicate the goals of the SSIP department-wide to help achieve the SiMR and connect the work being done.

The information demarcated in the sections below was chiefly provided by the instructional programming team, which includes: Tie Hodack, executive director; Alison Gauld, behavior and low

incidence coordinator; Jill Omer, speech, language, and autism coordinator; Blake Shearer, high school intervention and transition coordinator; Ryan Mathis, math intervention specialist;⁵ and Joann Lucero, reading intervention specialist.⁶

Connections with the Division of College, Career, and Technical Education

The division of special populations and student support works closely with the division of college, career, and technical education on effectively training and supporting districts with the RTI² EBP. The acumen and in-depth knowledge that staff within the college, career, and technical education division offer relative to students in the secondary school grade bands is an excellent supplement when providing training on this EBP. These staff better understand the unique qualities of high school, such as the scheduling structure, graduation requirements, and post-school preparation. Leveraging this knowledge to provide the best support possible to districts has been incredibly valued and well-received by district staff.

Currently, both divisions are working to provide more nuanced training for high schools in particular regarding effective implementation of RTI², and are expanding the RTI² Implementation Guide⁷ to include information specific to high school. With the division of college, career, and technical education taking the lead on high school, this has allowed the division of special populations and student services to rededicate efforts to supporting RTI² implementation in elementary and middle school. By virtue of both the divisions being under the chief academic officer, the collaboration is certainly more sustainable as both are aligned to a common set of goals and expectations. What's more, the division of college, career, and technical education has hired several staff who will be responsible to serve as direct supports to high schools implementing and sustaining RTI². This collaboration is directly connected to the coherent improvement strategies and EBPs that will help the state realize the SiMR.

Connections with the Centers of Regional Excellence (CORE)

As described in Phase I, CORE provides direct support to districts throughout eight regions of Tennessee. These eight agencies are intended to develop regional collaborative relationships with districts and provide technical assistance and professional development opportunities, problem-solving support, and assistance with state-issued requirements or guidance. The proximity to districts

⁵ Ryan Mathis has transitioned to the role of director of outreach, partnerships, and special projects. He will be working to improve communication relative to the SSIP with department staff, districts, and stakeholders. He will continue to support the work of the math interventionist while the department works to fill the vacancy.

⁶ Joann Lucero has transitioned to the role of EL instruction and intervention coordinator. She will continue to support the work of the reading interventionist while the department works to fill the vacancy.

⁷ A copy of the RTI² Implementation Guide, titled "Attachment 3 – RTI² Guide," has been attached under the "Phase 2 SSIP" tab in GRADS 360.

and knowledge of their unique needs and challenges imbues CORE with the ability to truly connect with districts and disseminate information efficiently. The CORE staff will play a crucial role in supporting districts with implementing and scaling-up EBPs to achieve the SiMR.

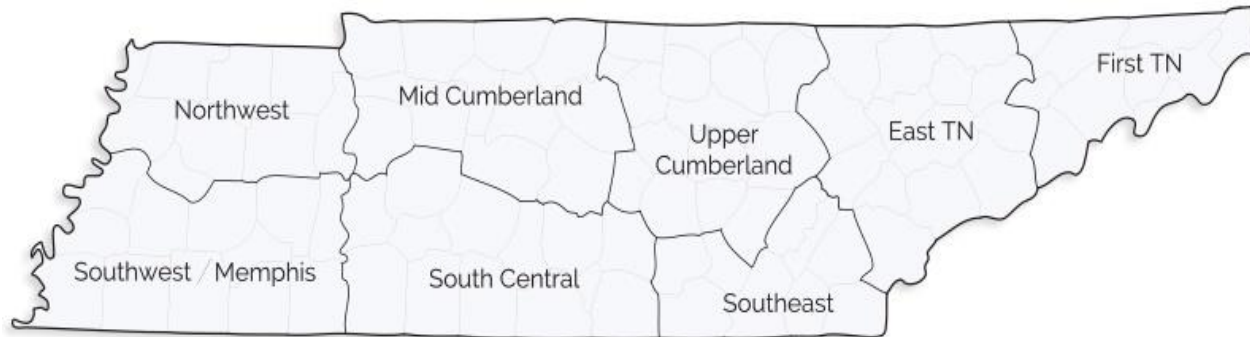


Figure 1.2. CORE regions broken out across the state of Tennessee.

Though collaboration with CORE was cited as a concern in the infrastructure analysis done in Phase I, subsequent to the restructure there have been increased opportunities for partnership. Indeed, CORE now falls under the chief academic officer, thus aligning the work of all divisions under this umbrella, including the division of special populations and student support.

While there remain some challenges with the partnership between CORE and the division of special populations and student support, there has certainly been more opportunity for cross-teaming and an increase in uniform communication and support to districts. To further align and strengthen CORE's activities and impact for SWDs, each CORE office has hired an interventionist to provide direct support to districts relative to at-risk populations and special populations, including SWDs. This interventionist is provided the content and training relative to initiatives led by the instructional programming team within the division of special populations and student support. Depending on knowledge, capacity, and needs within each regions, certain topics are redelivered by the interventionist. Trainings that have been provided by interventionists include RTI² continuum of service model (addresses data-based decision-making, aligning intervention, and choosing effective interventions), the writing of instructionally appropriate IEPs (IAIEPs), and increasing access for SWDs to core instruction through differentiation and scaffolding.

Over the past several months, members of the instructional programming team have offered training to CORE interventionists to that will enable them to support districts with implementation of the RTI² continuum of service model. There are refresher trainings that will continue to be offered regularly to CORE staff. Materials are also provided to CORE interventionists based on the content developed

through the RTI² task force. This task force is composed of a wide range of department staff from many divisions, and includes both the assistant commissioner of special populations and student support and the chief academic officer. The group meets regularly to discuss any concerns with the initiative and generate support content for those in the field including CORE staff. Professional learning community (PLC) guides are provided to CORE for redelivery by interventionists to those districts in each region.

In addition, the instructional programming team holds monthly calls and coaching with CORE to address RTI² concerns, questions from districts, and any problems of practice to consider. The instructional programming team has worked to ensure that CORE staff are as comfortable as possible with the RTI² content to confirm they are providing accurate and quality support to districts by being available for questions and attending training sessions led by CORE staff.

The writing of instructionally appropriate IEPs (IAIEPs) has been an important initiative within the division of special populations and student support over the past two years. Trainings on writing IAIEPs have been provided throughout the state (over 100 of the 146 districts in the state have received training). In addition, the Special Education Framework and Implementation Guide,⁸ which provide guidance to districts on developing IAIEPs to ensure students receive high-quality core instruction and intensive intervention specific to their areas of deficit, have been disseminated to districts. In the summer of 2015, the instructional programming team offered a follow-up training to CORE staff in all eight regions on IAIEPs. This session built on previous training offered in 2014. The intent of the training was to help prepare CORE staff to support teachers in the IAIEP writing process and have purposeful conversations around Universal Design for Learning (UDL), least restrictive environments, accommodations and modifications, and addressing the new statewide assessments in the IEP. With the knowledge and guidance from these trainings, CORE interventionists have been able to better assist districts within their region.

The instructional programming team has worked with CORE to promote the coherent improvement strategy of increasing access to core instruction for SWDs. This has been included in the IAIEP trainings provided to CORE staff and in differentiation and scaffolding trainings that address supporting SWDs in the general education setting. These trainings have been provided to districts at regional professional learning communities (PLCs) that CORE staff have hosted, and will continue to be provided over the coming months. The CORE staff also provide guidance and trainings to districts directly as requested.

⁸ A copy of the Special Education Framework, titled "Attachment 4 – Special Ed Framework," and a copy of the Implementation Guide, titled "Attachment 5 – Special Ed Implementation," have been attached under the "Phase 2 SSIP" tab in GRADS 360.

These trainings have reached a wide swath of district level staff, including special and general educators.

Connections with the Division of Teachers and Leaders

Throughout the last year and a half, the instructional programming team within the division of special populations and student support has been working with members of the division of teachers and leaders to establish a way to effectively disseminate information and create buy-in relative to SWDs and the SSIP's three coherent improvement strategies to district staff. The Tennessee Academy of School Leaders (TASL), managed by the division of teachers and leaders, has served as a forum through which to share information with district and site administrators who may not directly educate students. To date, approximately 16 TASL training events have taken place during which information relative to the RTI² continuum of service model, IAIEPs, and access to core instruction was provided. One of the intended takeaways from these trainings is the recognition that all students are general education students first, a view that is reinforced in the coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs. By educating leaders in this fashion, the department is ensuring all district staff are receiving the same messages about the strategies and the work being done relative to SWDs. Disseminating the same training and message to all staff mitigates opportunities for leaders to be left unaware of what educators are hearing or what issues they might be facing with implementation of initiatives.

In addition to the TASL trainings, the instructional programming team has provided over 30 administrator trainings to ensure administrators and leaders better understand: their roles in IEP meetings; how to schedule for SWDs and their intervention and make them the most intensive; and how to get SWDs access to core instruction. Not only has training been provided through several rounds regionally, but also individually in districts based upon request. Moreover, presentations have been offered at conferences throughout the state and to special interest groups such as parents and advocates.

Connections with Data and Research

The division of special populations and student support has been connecting with the division of data and research not only to discuss accountability metrics relative to the SSIP, but also to examine research around access for SWDs. In a recent report⁹ compiled and disseminated by the research and strategy team, implications of chronic absenteeism were considered. The team found that SWDs were more likely to be chronically absent, with over 12 percent of SWDs found chronically absent relative to

⁹ A copy of the Chronic Absenteeism report, titled "Attachment 6 – Chronic Absenteeism," has been attached under the "Phase 2 SSIP" tab in GRADS 360.

7 percent of non-disabled peers. Because absence thwarts access to core instruction, the division of special populations and student support has recognized that this is an area that requires attention. The work with the division of data and research has lent credence to these concerns with absenteeism and helped formulate some of the work outlined in the RTI² Behavior (RTI² B) initiative.

Connections with the Office of Consolidated Planning and Monitoring (CPM)

The department has made great strides to develop CPM into a division that can complete widespread monitoring of all federal programs, including IDEA. Due to the complexities of IDEA, training has been provided to CPM staff to ensure they are aware not just of the legislation itself, but also of the work being done in districts relative to SWDs. The instructional programming team has worked with CPM staff throughout the last two years to train on the coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs currently underway. Monitoring consultants within CPM have received training on RTI² and how to assess initial SLD eligibilities to determine whether the RTI² continuum of service model has been used accurately. The director of special education eligibility for the division of special populations and student support has worked in tandem with monitors reviewing the SLD eligibilities to provide guidance on what they should be looking for in the documents.¹⁰ Additionally, CPM staff have received training from the instructional programming team relative to IAIEPs and access to core instruction (particularly the differentiation and scaffolding training) to complete more thorough monitoring. These trainings have allowed CPM staff to lead work in developing corrective action plans related to IAIEPs and access to core instruction. On the whole, by having CPM staff aware of these EBPs, they can better support districts throughout the planning and monitoring process.

Timelines

With regard to timelines for infrastructure changes, the restructuring and strategic plan led by the Commissioner of Education and her office commenced and concluded in 2015. Throughout this year the division of special populations and student support worked to strengthen connections with divisions across the entire department and increase collaboration. The timelines related to the SSIP activities are contingent on the SPDG. Indeed, these funds will be used to provide the trainings relative to two of the coherent improvement strategies and fund three positions to increase the capacity of the division of special populations and student support. The department is currently waiting on the approval of the SPDG funds by the legislature. Once the funds are approved, the division will immediately begin the hiring process to secure the department interventionists who will support the SSIP.

¹⁰ Information provided by Theresa Nicholls, director of special education eligibility.



Leveraging Statewide Plans and Initiatives

Beyond the three coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs highlighted in Phase I, there are many other initiatives taking place throughout the department that have a direct impact on SWDs and could potentially support districts as they implement and scale-up EBPs to achieve the SiMR. Representatives from the division of special populations and student support will play a role in these initiatives, especially if they align the priorities outlined in the new strategic plan.¹¹

Early Foundations and Literacy

Some of the initiatives outlined in the strategic plan include:

- Developing a kindergarten readiness screener by 2017-18 with readiness benchmarks and metrics in literacy, language, and math¹²
- Establishing an Early Literacy Council that defines third-grade reading proficiency and offers best practices
- Holding Regional Educator Summits at CORE offices throughout the state
- Creating an enhanced measurement process to increase pre-K program understanding and accountability for student readiness
- Selecting an optional Tennessee-specific second grade assessment available to districts by 2016-17
- Providing support and training for a statewide literacy coach initiative starting by fall 2017

These initiatives have inherent impacts on and ramifications for SWDs. Thus, it has been crucial for the division of special populations and student support to play an active role in fleshing out this priority. Several staff serve on the Early Foundations task force, which is currently working to establish the screener and the necessary benchmarks that most effectively measure readiness. A pre-K observation tool is also being developed to supplement the screener. Involvement of special populations and student support staff has ensured that SWDs are included in discussions of kindergarten readiness and that metrics do not have bias in assessment of SWDs and other subgroups.

Additionally, a district interventionist sits on the Early Literacy Council to ensure representation of the SWDs subgroup. The council will play a pivotal role in improvements to early literacy in Tennessee. The council's charge is to "specifically draft a report for the commissioner with recommendations related to the definition of third grade reading proficiency, assessment tools for K-2, changes to reading

¹¹ This information comes from the strategic plan, a copy of which, titled "Attachment 2 – Strategic Plan," has been attached under the "Phase 2 SSIP" tab in GRADS 360.

¹² Information provided by Tie Hodack, executive director of instructional programming.

standards for teacher preparation, feedback on teacher training and coaching needs, and how to build early literacy foundations into all services that the state provides to children.”¹³

The Regional Educator Summits to be held in summer 2016 will offer teachers professional development opportunities on a wide range of topics. The most salient strand of training for this priority is the evidence-based literacy training focused on grade bands of pre-K to kindergarten, grades 1-2, and grades 3-4. The content of this training is intended to support teachers serving all students, including SWDs. In the early grades, the primary method for engaging students with complex texts is through read alouds. This training will focus on selecting high-quality, appropriately-complex texts for read aloud, how to create read aloud lesson plans that scaffold higher-order questions, how to assemble a unit of read aloud texts that build knowledge and vocabulary, and how to design an aligned culminating task for a unit that includes speaking and writing.¹⁴

To address the current state of literacy in Tennessee, department developed an internal report, “Setting the Foundation: A Report on Elementary Grades Reading in Tennessee,”¹⁵ in February 2016. It was completed in response to concerns over ELA assessment results and findings that at least half of the students in the state complete third grade without becoming readers. The report honed in on what the assessment results mean, the long-term consequences of students left unprepared with regard to literacy, a dissection of what literacy truly is, and how to go about rectifying the pervasively low literacy results that hinder student outcomes. This is seminal report that aligns well with the literacy component of the SiMR.

The work being done for this priority closely aligns with the SiMR’s focus on improving literacy outcomes. As well, the focus on the foundational grades will help lay a strong base of knowledge for all students, including SWDs, that place them on a positive trajectory for success in later grades. Because the SiMR is focused on outcomes for those in grades 3-8, the department hopes that the favorable effects of the initiatives around early literacy will be manifest in the outcomes on the ELA statewide assessments.

High School and Bridge to Postsecondary

Some of the initiatives outlined in the strategic plan include:

¹³ For additional information, see <http://tnclassroomchronicles.org/meet-members-early-literacy-council/>.

¹⁴ For additional information, see <http://tn.gov/education/topic/tdoe2-training-2016-summer-professional-development>.

¹⁵ A copy of this report, titled “Attachment 7 – Setting the Foundation,” has been attached under the “Phase 2 SSIP” tab in GRADS 360.

- Establishing postsecondary and career planning requirements for middle and high school students
- Assembling a cross-agency task force that will define postsecondary and workforce readiness
- Fostering more academic partnerships between high schools and Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCATs)
- Developing the CollegeforTN.org portal and support pathway that allows students, parents, and counselors to determine how students are progressing in comparison to key college-readiness benchmarks

While many of the initiatives related to this priority are still in inchoate stages, the division of special populations and student support has been in constant communication with the division of college, career, and technical education to discuss how SWDs fit into the plans. The latter division will be taking the lead on many of these initiatives. Currently, the instructional programming team in the division of special populations and student support has been extremely focused on transition planning for SWDs and is developing a transition framework with input from a transition task force. This work will fold nicely into the new requirements for middle and high school students related to postsecondary and career planning taking place for all students. Additionally, the instructional programming team has established a work-based learning (WBL) leadership council for special education that will provide trainings and support to districts across the state. This council will also meet to discuss the academic standards for the WBL 6107 course code in high school. The information gleaned from this work will be invaluable as the cross-agency task force is assembled to define postsecondary and workforce readiness for all students, including SWDs.

All Means All

Some of the initiatives outlined in the strategic plan include:

- Training on RTI² and RTI² Behavior (RTI² B) that includes climate, attendance, anti-bullying, and behavioral supports
- Increasing access to core instruction for ELs
- Piloting personalized learning programs to support student remediation and acceleration
- Data sharing and best practice networking aimed at closing districts' teaching equity gaps
- Creating a state-facilitated student advisory group to advise the department on student needs
- Developing educator data dashboards and early warning data systems

Much of the work related to this priority is being led by staff within the division of special populations and student support. While RTI² B will be an optional general education initiative, and will address behavior concerns for all students, SWDs will be a major topic of discussion. The instructional programming team will host trainings to discuss the newly released RTI² B manual and support districts in their implementation of the behavior component. Addressing behavior in a positive and

consistent manner means students will be able to continue accessing content in their least restrictive environment.

Teacher equity gaps have been an increased focus within the department, and the division of special populations and student support is currently working with the division of teachers and leaders to analyze these persistent equity gaps. The division of teachers and leaders has already conducted a great deal of research on the equity gaps for all students and shared their studies with districts to engage in a dialogue of how to place the districts' most effective teachers to improve outcomes for students. This division is now looking at disaggregating the data gathered in their research to look at the impact on SWDs and how teachers are assigned to the students of greatest need. The information yielded from this research will be used to assist districts in the equitable allocation of their most effective staff.

The increased emphasis on safeguarding that all SWDs have access to core instruction, as evidenced by the behavior initiatives and RTI² continuum of service models, aligns this priority nicely with the SSIP's SiMR. Indeed, for students to succeed on statewide assessments, they must have access to the core content measured by these assessments. In addition, by using a multi-tiered system of support like RTI² to begin referral procedures for students suspected of an SLD, the amount of students inappropriately identified will be abated, thus allowing more resources to be allocated to those actually requiring special education supports. More intensive intervention can help close skill gaps and improve student outcomes on standards-based assessments.

Educator Support

Some of the initiatives outlined in the strategic plan include:

- Developing an improved public report card evaluating the performance of educator preparation programs
- Using student surveys as a component of teacher evaluation
- Creating a rubric designed to support districts and schools in evaluating professional learning options
- Additional Teacher Educator Acceleration Model (TEAM) coach support
- Allocating support for differentiated pay plans aligned to instructional priorities
- Developing a Governor's Academy for School Leadership to train aspiring school principals
- Developing a transformational leadership advisory council

The division of special populations and student support has been working in concert with the division of teachers and leaders to assess the current TEAM intervention observation tool. Sometimes it is difficult for district leaders to effectively evaluate special education teachers and provide viable

feedback due to the unique nuances and skills involved in educating SWDs. Further training for these leaders, which have and will continue to be provided at the TASL academies, will allow for increased knowledge in this specific area, but a revamped tool to observe special education teachers will also be critical. Leaders being more cognizant of the role of the special educator will be better equipped to provide feedback and support to these teachers, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for SWDs.

The instructional programming team has secured a Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center grant to assist three participating universities (University of Memphis – Lambeth, Vanderbilt University, and University of Tennessee) with improving special education teacher preparation programs. Through the grant, the instructional programming team will be able to relay to these participating teacher preparation programs: Tennessee’s educational priorities, the gaps in the knowledge seen with recent graduates from teacher preparation programs across the state, and how such gaps can be ameliorated. The increased collaboration between the department and special education teacher preparation programs will help ensure that special educators are exiting universities with the appropriate skills to support SWDs and department initiatives. To connect this work to the SSIP, the participating universities in this CEEDAR grant will be included on the evaluation team (see “Evaluation” component) to both share with them the three coherent improvement strategies identified by the department and benefit from their acumen.

District Empowerment

Some of the initiatives outlined in the strategic plan include:

- Developing communication toolkits to assist districts in sharing their own data
- Providing technical assistance on creating comprehensive multi-year plans using the coordinated spending guide
- Developing real-time educator dashboards providing 360-degree views of student data
- Creating single sign-on access and increased automation for state applications and reporting systems
- Establishing a Learning Management Platform to support adaptive instruction pilots

The data team from the division of special populations and student support has been involved in conversations relative to presentation of data to educators, parents, and district leaders to help them more effectively assess student progress and data. The statewide IEP data management system, EasyIEP, which is provided by the department to all public districts, has been redesigned to provide more effective, actionable data to district staff more quickly. The use of widgets displaying student information (disability categories, educational environment placement, and compliance) have made it easier for users to get a pulse on their students or schools. The ease by which this data is provided gives users something concrete and viable to support their work. The data gathered through the

EasyIEP system will be imperative for evaluation, and more information is specified in the “Evaluation” component.

Stakeholder Input

Throughout Phase I and Phase II, the department has continued to solicit feedback from stakeholders. State infrastructure has been a consistent topic of conversation in these requests for feedback as so much of the success of the SSIP is contingent on effective organization. In the fall of 2015, the director of data services spoke across the state at three separate conferences for special education supervisors about the status of the Phase II and the need to assess infrastructure¹⁶. These supervisors were encouraged to complete a survey developed by the department to assess stakeholder perceptions of the state infrastructure, how well the coherent improvement strategies and EBPs have been communicated to districts, what the most effective way to evaluate the SSIP might be, and what evaluation questions should be asked.¹⁷

The survey was also sent to the parent advocacy group STEP (Support and Training for Exceptional Parents) to disseminate to families; the Governor’s Advisory Council for the Education of Students with Disabilities members, which includes individuals with disabilities, parents of students with disabilities, educators, and district staff; and to users of the statewide IEP data management system, EasyIEP, which include teachers, related services providers, psychologists, and other IEP team members who work in the system. The survey was sent to this wide cadre of stakeholders to ensure that the unique perspectives of all were recognized and considered.

Approximately 78 stakeholders completed the survey. While this certainly wasn’t an extremely large proportion of all those from whom feedback was solicited, the department was pleased to receive quality and thorough responses from a diverse cross-section of stakeholders. The feedback provided excellent information about the perceptions of the department’s infrastructure, problematic areas in the arrangement, and observation of whether or not the current structure will be able to effectively support districts in the coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs. The following data was gathered from the survey relative to infrastructure.¹⁸

¹⁶ Information provided by Rachel Wilkinson, director of data services.

¹⁷ A copy of the survey, titled “Attachment 8 – Survey,” has been attached under the “Phase 2 SSIP” tab in GRADS 360.

¹⁸ A copy of the survey results, titled “Attachment 9 – Survey Results,” has been attached under the “Phase 2 SSIP” tab in GRADS 360.

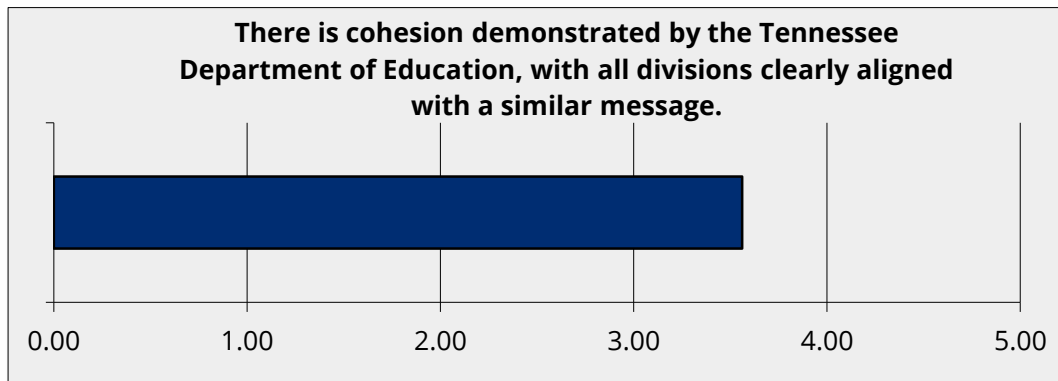


Figure 1.3. The average rating was 3.56 out of 5.0, with 54.54% of respondents agreeing and 9.1% strongly agreeing.

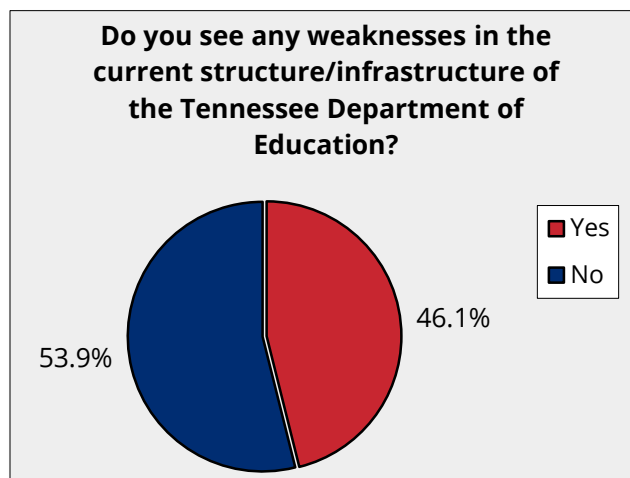


Figure 1.4. There were 35 respondents who answered “yes” to this question. The reasons that were cited for answering “yes” included: disconnection of the department from districts; high turnover among department staff; conflicting communication or inadequate communication disseminated by department; weaknesses in CORE offices; and poor planning.

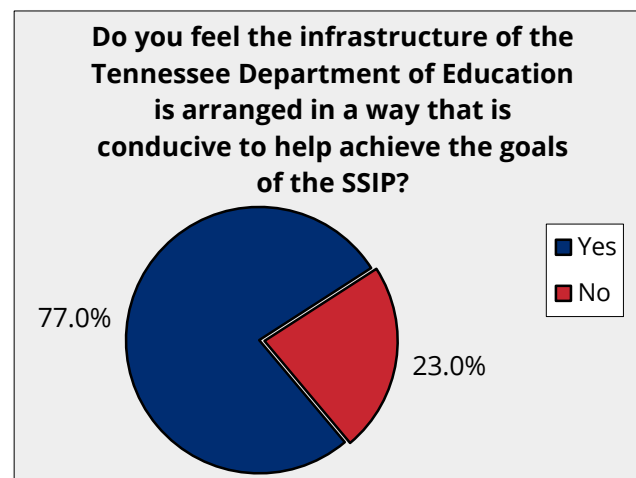


Figure 1.5. There were 57 respondents who answered “yes” to this question.

On the whole, the feedback from stakeholders was positive. While there were areas of concern, the changes in infrastructure that took place over the past year will likely ameliorate many of these concerns as the wrinkles are ironed out across the organization. Currently, there are efforts taking place across the department to address the issues cited in these surveys. Based on concerns from stakeholders regarding issues with inconsistent or inadequate communication, the department is using a communications review team to evaluate all communication to be disseminated to districts and

the public. Thus, should communications not align, this is addressed on the front end prior to public release.

Updates to the CORE offices are being done to mitigate disconnect between the department and districts. The movement of CORE under the chief academic officer and the increased communications between the division of special populations and student support and CORE based on this arrangement will yield positive results with districts. Trainings provided by the instructional programming to CORE staff are instilling in these employees the knowledge of special education content and resources to better support districts at the ground level.

The revised strategic plan released at the end of 2015 will be an excellent blueprint that will help map out initiatives and department led work so that stakeholders don't experience the frustrations cited with regard to poor planning. By having a comprehensive strategic plan that addresses all divisions and groups within the department, the work is intentional and aligned department-wide. This will prevent initiatives being developed and implemented in isolation and while still nebulous.

Widespread change to infrastructure can certainly take time to be fully established but the connections being fostered across divisions within the department will flourish over time, ideally staving off the concerns shared in the survey. Tennessee will survey these same stakeholders in the fall of 2016 with some of the same questions to see if there is any improvement from the baseline survey data from 2015.



Moving Forward: Phase II

Support for District Implementation of EBPs

In Phase I, the department developed the three coherent improvement strategies that have been at the forefront of much of the work being done across the state over the past several years. As detailed in the “Infrastructure Development” component, the three strategies are: 1) increasing access for SWDs to high quality core instruction; 2) employing a continuum of service model in which special education serves as the most intensive intervention; and 3) writing instructionally appropriate IEPs (IAIEPs) to address students’ skill deficits as they relate to academic content standards so they can succeed in the general education setting.

In practice, these three strategies are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, ensuring that SWDs have access to core instruction to the maximum extent possible while still having their needs met in the general education and special education settings encompasses all three strategies. There are numerous evidence-based practices (EBPs) undergirding each of the coherent improvement strategies, and they are entrenched in research and best-practices that have been espoused for decades. Most of these EBPs have already been selected and implemented throughout the state in some capacity. Selection of these EBPs was informed by research and supported by the knowledge and expertise of the members of the department-led task force who each brought their unique perspectives to the table. For the coming school year, further supports for implementation of these EBPs in select districts will continue to be provided to address the goals of the SSIP and achievement of the SiMR.

While the department has implemented the three coherent improvement strategies across the state, continued support for districts as they implement these strategies will be essential to ensure continued student success and sustain EBPs. To provide this support to districts, the state will utilize the State Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) noted in the “Infrastructure Development” component.

When writing the application for the SPDG, much of the scope of work proposed was aligned to the work being done for the SSIP in Phase I. The department made a conscious decision to connect the activities in both programs and to unite resources toward a common goal (the SiMR). To be sure, the department has made great strides to ensure the SSIP does not exist in isolation, and instead that all the work being done, particularly in the division of special populations and student support, is cohesive and uniform.

While the SPDG offers a monetary way in which the department can provide support to districts, this in and of itself does not provide sufficient resources to ensure that districts have the capacity to the

coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs effectively. To identify how to most skillfully provide this support, the department utilized implementation science methodology when writing the application for the SPDG in conjunction with the SSIP. The SPDG is an essential component of the SSIP, and the work done as a result of the SPDG will help achieve the SiMR.

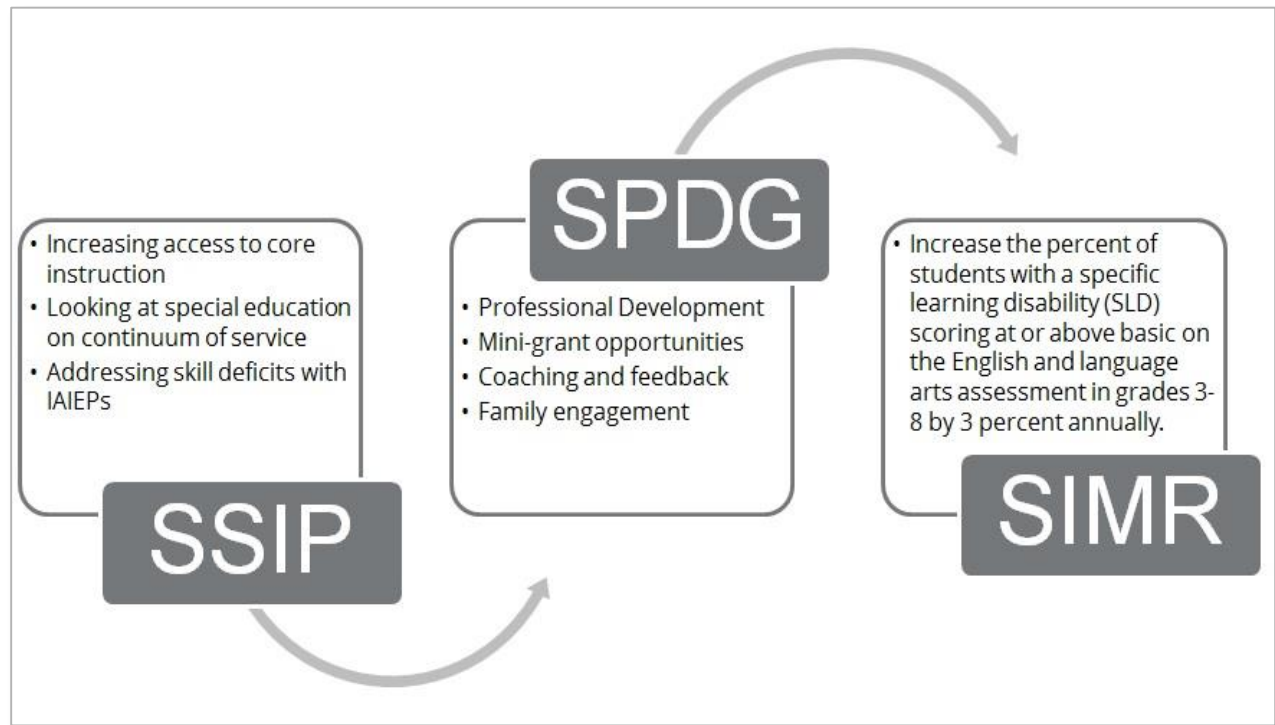


Figure 2.1. This graphic underscores the connection Tennessee has made between the SSIP, SPDG, and SiMR. The SSIP is the plan with coherent improvement strategies, the SPDG provides the resources to implement these strategies and their EBPs, and both work in concert to achieve the end goal, which is the SiMR.



Use of Implementation Science

During identification of the coherent improvement strategies in Phase I, the department employed the major tenets of implementation science to develop a plan for district support.¹⁹ This same process was utilized in the SPDG to ensure alignment with the SSIP. To begin the process of fleshing out the SSIP's scope of work, the department determined the key implementation teams that would be involved with the SSIP, identified usable interventions (the coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs), plotted out the implementation stages of the SSIP, assessed the implementation

¹⁹ Dean L. Fixen, et al, "Implementation Research: A Synthesis of the Literature," *National Implementation Research Network* (Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, 2005).

drivers needed to successfully support the work of districts, and addressed improvement cycles to best exact the new policies and practices outlined in the SSIP.

*Implementation Teams*²⁰

As the department began to assess its capital and resources during Phase I and Phase II, it became clear that implementation teams would need to be established to certify success of the SPDG and SSIP as well as the application of coherent improvement strategies and their EBPs in districts across the state. Based on research regarding implementation science, the department recognized the need for multiple implementation teams at different levels.

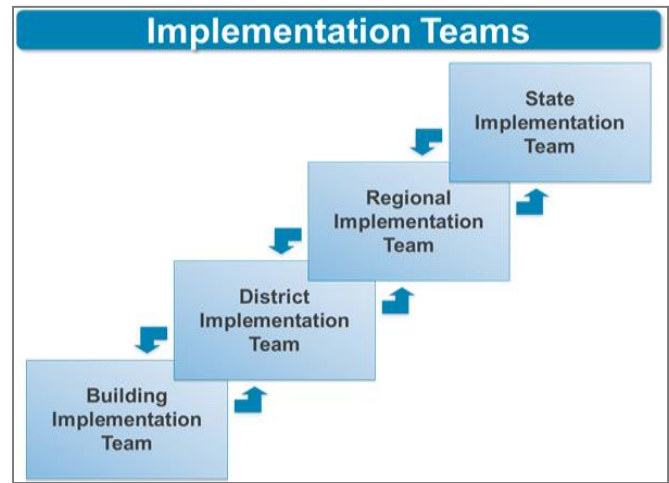


Figure 2.2. The interrelation of the four different implementation teams.



State Implementation Team

The implementation team for the SSIP at the state level is primarily comprised of members of the division of special populations and student support, including the assistant commissioner of special populations and student support (Joey Hassell), the executive director of instructional programming (Tie Hodack), the director of special education eligibility (Theresa Nicholls), the director of data services (Rachel Wilkinson), the high school intervention and transition coordinator (Blake Shearer), the speech, language, and autism coordinator (Jill Omer), the reading intervention specialist (Joann Lucero), the math intervention specialist (Ryan Mathis), and the behavior and low-incidence coordinator (Alison Gauld). Each member of this implementation team has an in-depth knowledge of core competencies related to the SSIP and brings a crucial set of skills and knowledge about special education programs, effective instruction and intervention practices, and experience in making data-based decisions.

In addition, the reading intervention specialist and math intervention specialist on the implementation team have worked with content experts in literacy and math in the former division of curriculum and instruction with developing content and delivering training relative to strategies like access to core

²⁰ Karen A. Blasé, et al, "Implementation Science – Changing Hearts, Minds, Behavior, and Systems to Improve Educational Outcomes," Paper presented at the Wing Institute's Ninth Annual Summit on Evidence-Based Education, Berkeley, 2015.